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CHINESE NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY:
IMPLICATIONS FOR A 21ST CENTURY AIR FORCE

by

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Abstract

Examination of Chinese national security issues is incomplete without a frame of reference that includes Chinese dynastic history, culture, and thought. Additionally, such examination requires viewing through lenses created by modern China's economics and politics. When viewed in this holistic fashion, Chinese defense strategies and concerns, especially with respect to two extremely important and timely issues, modernization of the PLA and Taiwan, can be discerned in a clearer light, resulting in an better, if more complex, understanding of the potential for military action on behalf of China tempered by the realities and difficulties China faces in improving a military force under their worldview and, also, their political and economic restraints. Accordingly, as a part of a coordinated effort, the US Air Force can provide both significant deterrence for military action in the Pacific in the form of appropriate force deployment and employment, as well as dissuasion from a potentially perceived Chinese requirement for military action through taking a "longer view" in understanding the value of activities such as military-to-military engagement.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Few topics generate as much discussion and have the potential to generate the same amount of disagreement as the relationship of the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC). Recent events such as Beijing passing an "anti-secession" law aimed at Taiwan continue to add relevance to this issue for military scholars. At the same time, there have been comparatively fewer scholarly studies within the military establishment on this subject since 11 September 2001¹. While understandable, the recent focus on terrorism, non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and the Middle East doesn't obviate the responsibility to continue to study and strive to understand the Chinese military and the requirement for the United States military and, particularly, the United States Air Force to provide a degree of readiness for challenges in the Pacific. Indeed, some would say that there is a real sense that China, as a possible "threat to US interests has never disappeared; it receded into the background after 9/11."²

This paper examines recent trends in Chinese strategic military thinking within a holistic framework and suggests that while more truncated views may give technically accurate analyses, they fall short of "the big picture." Such incomplete studies emphasizing order of battle numbers or other statistics while possibly ignoring other less easily discerned factors, may ultimately lead to miscalculations; and military

miscalculations can't be a part of our relationship with the PRC. Finally, the paper offers some suggestions and thoughts for the United States Air Force, in particular, which would be helpful in fulfilling our roles and missions in the Pacific theater and in understanding the actions that the PRC may or may not take.

Ambiguity

Any study of China is faced with the problem of seemingly endless ambiguities within policies, actions, and the culture. To understand the often Janus-like Chinese demands a level of tolerance for ambiguity that is almost unmatched anywhere else. By way of example, it's noteworthy that just a few years ago, the Clinton administration called China "a strategic partner" of the United States in contrast to President Bush's more recent portrayal of the Chinese as strategic rivals.³ Such diametrically opposed statements are not, as some are likely to believe, just reflective of political differences, but may, in fact, both be true. President Clinton's optimistic view is joined by that of former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger who called China "no military colossus" and could be counted on to "pursue its self-interest through cooperation" while on the other hand, House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi is outspoken in her concern for Chinese human rights issues.⁴

In addition to the often confusing and contradictory pieces of information that come out of the secretive PRC, there is also a cultural facet of ambiguity that is present. In fact, one analyst recently pointed out that, "From Beijing's perspective, strategic ambiguity--including strategic denial and deception--is a mechanism to influence the policies of foreign governments and the opinions of the general public and elites in other countries. China's leaders believe that ambiguity and stressing the "just nature" of

Chinese actions have the effect of “drawing out” those who oppose and those who support China’s interests abroad. Once China’s leaders make the distinction between friend and foe, they can develop and tailor themes to counter opposition and advance their overall agenda.”⁵

Mirror Imaging

While accepting and dealing with ambiguity, any analysis of the Chinese must avoid the pitfall of “mirror imaging.” The tendency to “mirror image,” that is, to view another people or culture from one’s own framework is one that is universally taught to be avoided by intelligence analysts and foreign area specialists alike. Often, actions that make little sense; seemingly unique responses to crises; or veiled answers to questions that one would think would require straightforward responses are all examples of situations that may potentially lead to mirror imaging. By implanting one’s own cultural biases, it’s easy then to misinterpret one’s observation.

Holistic View

Finally, it’s critical to take a larger or holistic view in any attempt to understand Chinese military thought. For instance, an extensive 2003 Department of Defense report on Chinese military capability focused heavily on the technical specifics of military modernization among other issues; however, our understanding of the details are even more enhanced when we view such reviews through the lenses of historical context and economic capabilities in order to begin to fully understand their modernization, motivation, and changing military thought and doctrine.⁶

Notes

¹ A survey of Air University generated papers shows about three times as many papers on China in the four years before 9/11 than after.

² Quoted in Murray Hiebert, "US-China Tensions Resurface," *The Wall Street Journal*, 25 Feb 2005, 16.

³ Ross Terrill, *The New Chinese Empire: Beijing's Political Dilemma and What it Means for the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2003), 10.

⁴ Peter Hays Gries, *China's New Nationalism-Pride, Politics, and Diplomacy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 2-3.

⁵ Department of Defense, *Annual Report on the Military Power of the People's Republic of China*, 28 July 2003, 12, on-line, Internet, 10 January 2005. Available from

<http://www.defenselink.mil/pubs/20030730chinaex.pdf>

⁶ Ibid, 18-39.

Chapter 2

Chinese Defense “Strategy”

After all the humiliations of the past, it is time for China to stand up again in the world.

- Liang Yan, Beijing office worker

Although the PRC publishes neither a formal National Security Strategy nor a National Defense Strategy in the same sense as those published by the United States, there is much to be gleaned by examining Chinese military writings and analysis. Additionally, in recent years, Beijing has presented “white papers” expressing views on defense issues. When examining the evolution of these defense white papers since the late 1990s, one can begin to gain an impression of the latest Chinese thinking on security issues. However, as Sinologist David Shambaugh, has noted, while these white papers outline an “assessment of China’s national security environment...the PLA (People’s Liberation Army) unfortunately does not publish a National Military Strategy document explicitly outlining its war fighting doctrine.”¹ Instead, we must turn to observations and other reports, and examine them from both an historical perspective and from within the many different forces affecting China today.

Historical Perspective

After the mistaken bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade in 1999, a state-approved editorial appeared in Beijing's major newspaper, *Ren Min Ri Bao* (People's Daily).

This is 1999, not 1899. This is not...the age when people can barge about in the world just by sending a few gunboats...it is not the age when the Western powers plundered the Imperial Palace at will, destroyed the Old Summer Palace, and seized Hong Kong and Macao...China is a China that has stood up; it is a China that defeated the Japanese fascists; it is a China that had a trial of strength and won victory over the United States on the Korean battleground. The Chinese people are not to be bullied, and China's sovereignty and dignity are not to be violated. The hot blood of people of ideas and integrity who opposed imperialism for over 150 years flows in the veins of the Chinese people. US-led NATO had better remember this.²

Indeed, the Chinese viewed this accident thousands of miles away from their borders as not an isolated event, but “the latest in a long series of Western aggressions against China.”³ Every defense and security related development in China can be examined in a broader historical context to include recent history as well as dynastic and cultural traditions centuries old.

The above quote from the People's Daily demonstrates the ease at which the Chinese see today's events in a framework stretching much further back in time than Western thought tends to view modern geopolitical issues. For the Chinese, it was no trouble at all seeing the embassy bombing as just the latest occurrence stemming from the 19th Century era of European and Western expansion and exploitation along the Chinese coast and known by them as the “Century of Shame.”

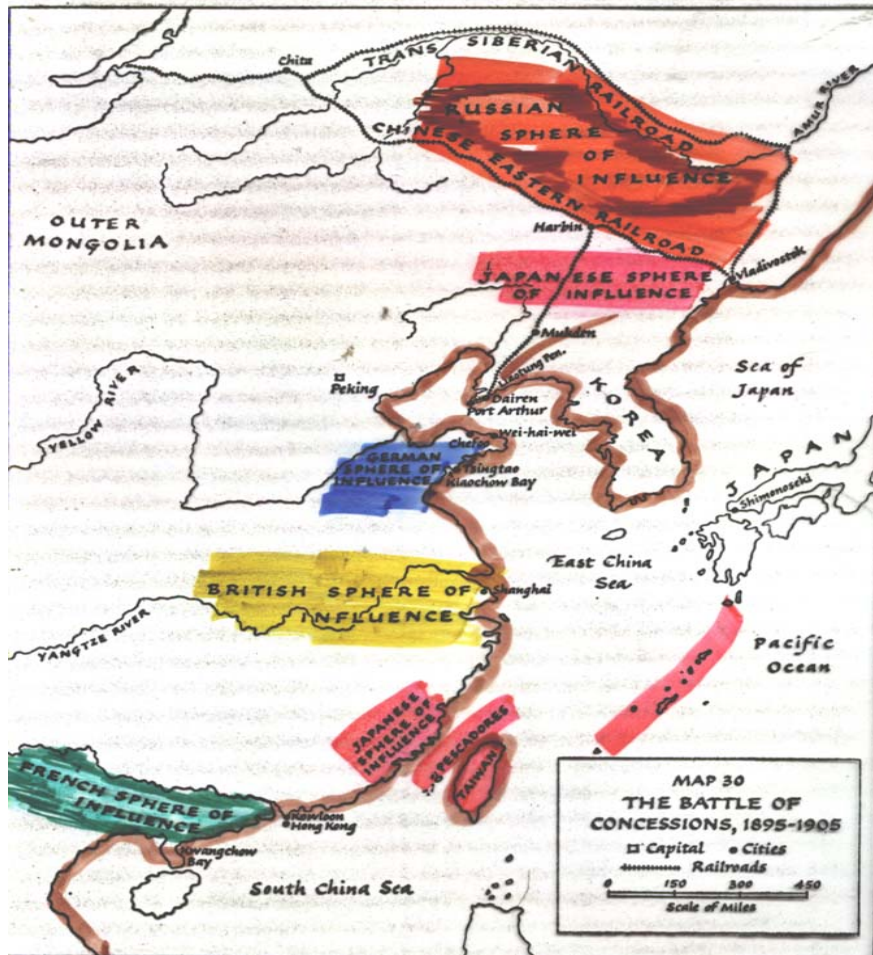


Figure 1: Foreign Spheres of Influence from "the Century of Shame"⁴

When the PRC presents concerns, beliefs, or changes with regard to their security or defense posture, they do so with an absolute certainty that it's an extension of millennia of history. Of course, as their own homily states, "History is a maiden, and you can dress her up however you please."⁵ This reminds us that it's less important to know the facts of Chinese history in order to better understand today's Chinese defense posture than it is to understand Chinese perception of their own history. Ross Terrill noted this succinctly: "To understand Beijing's policies ... one must understand the influence of traditional Chinese world order thinking. Most dynasties tottered or collapsed when faced with the terrible twins of *nei luan* (internal disorder) and *wai huan* (external threat). This is what

Beijing fears today. The new Chinese empire is peculiarly vulnerable to such double trouble because of the burgeoning new society and economy of parts of the PRC, the brittleness of centralized Leninist rule, and the anachronism of being a multicultural empire in the 21st Century.”⁶

Indeed, terming modern China as a “new empire” in comparison with dynastic empires of old is not farfetched at all. The political history of China is full of traditional myth mingled with reality of geography and politics and fragmentation, while political change has almost always come via civil war or invasion.⁷ Even a cursory examination of Chinese history finds many more similarities than differences with the modern People’s Republic.

Chinese Communism always differed from that of the Soviet Union. Mao Zedong realized that a Soviet proletariat made of up urban workers could not be applied to the peasant population of China. Rejecting the city-centric approach of Soviet advisors, Mao gained power for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the countryside and upon consolidating power, assumed a position not unlike the previous dynastic Chinese emperors. At the same time, Communist “cadres” replaced midlevel management in the provinces and life changed little, if at all, for the majority of the population. Programs such as the “Great Leap Forward” were reminiscent of past imperial projects while more traditional communist attempts to change society such as the “Cultural Revolution” failed to achieve fundamental social change.⁸

In fact, a good case can be made that the communist PRC is simply the latest dynastic version of the Chinese empire. “As Willima Kirby wrote of the Republican period (directly preceding the communist takeover), “The Qing (Dynasty) fell, but the

empire remained...and astonishingly, the huge, unwieldy, multicultural Qing empire, after an interval became the “nation” we know as the PRC.”⁹ Accordingly, Chinese leaders can just as easily see themselves as the heirs of emperors as the successors to Mao Zedong and Deng Xiaoping. Understanding today’s Chinese leadership’s thoughts on defense and security, then, can be greatly enhanced by understanding leadership concerns of the past. They are often the same. For instance, the following analysis of modern Chinese government would be little changed if one was referring to any of a number of previous dynastic leaders: Its essential traits are three: “driving force comes from above, not below; it sees itself as the guardian of truth; and any compromises it makes with other great powers are tactical in nature, not based on an acceptance of moral comparability between China and the world of sovereign states.”¹⁰

Unity

First and foremost, Chinese security emphasizes the idea of unity. “The Chinese state was and is obsessed with unity. This predilection is as old as the Warring States and as current as Beijing’s repression of Xinjiang Muslims post-9/11. If there is unity of opinion, then one can govern well, says the *Lu shi chunqiu* of the 3rd Century B.C.; if there are divergences, then there will be disorder. Oneness fosters safety; difference brings danger.”¹¹ Noted military historian Andrew Scobell put it this way, “national unification is a core value in China’s national security calculus on which no compromise is possible...in part because of China’s history of division and inability to stop exploitation and oppression by foreign powers.” He goes on to note that “...internal warfare has been central to the genesis and evolution of the (Chinese military). Scholars of Chinese strategic culture cannot afford to ignore the use of military force within

China.”¹² As the defense white papers demonstrate, even though the PLA is attempting to modernize in both thought and capability, the *imprimatur* for them to be the central government’s tool to enforce unity hasn’t changed. One of the real concerns as a result of this historical perspective is the paradoxical thinking in China that “it is more secure than for centuries, yet its mood is agitated, strident, and fearful...To Beijing, the decline and fall of the Soviet Union showed that political liberalization endangers national unity.”¹³ In fact, faced with the opportunity and economic necessity to reform and liberalize Chinese policies, it’s easy for the CCP leadership to take a lesson from the last days of the Qing dynasty that perhaps were hastened by a reform movement.¹⁴

Stability

As critical as the principle of national unity is the ideal of a stable China. Chinese leaders and analysts have always viewed “threats, security and power in more comprehensive terms than many Westerners, who tend to adopt narrower...definitions. In the more comprehensive context, domestic “stability” is always paramount...and external threats are usually perceived in the context of aggravating domestic instability.”¹⁵

The tradition of strong centralized rule - at the family, village, province, and national levels - is as old as China itself. It is legitimized by Confucian teachings as an extension of the family structure on a grand scale. Strong rule provides peace and stability; weak rule invites rebellion, invasion, and tragedy. Stability and continuity are revered because change has almost always entailed enormous bloodshed, social chaos, and economic collapse.¹⁶ Confucian principles and ideals must be taken into account in analysis of Chinese actions. Maoist and other communist philosophies have not in any way

supplanted them, but instead the PRC and CCP leadership have simply adapted and melded old with new and are continuing to emphasize thoughts that guided ancient leaders. Thus, they support the assertion that stability starts with strong and inviolate central leadership and go to great lengths to justify almost any action to preserve their positions as a direct corollary of preserving the nation. As Bernstein and Munro said, “Beijing’s rulers will risk war...not because it’s in the country’s interest, but because it’s in the interest of the governing clique.”¹⁷ To the rulers of the modern PRC “empire” there, in fact, is no conflict in those two interests. Interestingly, this emphasis on political survival of the ruling elite has great effect on their ability to conduct government affairs in time of crisis. Often the signals sent by the Chinese government to both domestic and foreign audiences are not as clear and understandable as they believe them to be. “China’s crisis management strategy is geared towards obtaining the maximum political advantage...as opposed to resolving the crisis.”¹⁸ Once again the similarities to former imperial leadership are all too clear. Lyman Miller’s writings about the leadership in the Qing Dynasty are easily applied to the modern leaders of the PRC: “What emerges is a picture of imperial power severely limited by the practical realities and complexities of elite politics. Emperors in the late imperial era *reigned* far more frequently than they ruled.”¹⁹

Relationships with Other Nations

China seldom has demonstrated forceful expansionist tendencies, and when she has crossed her borders it has almost always been in response to perceived external threats or in action to preserve unity or stability. To the contrary, they typically have withdrawn from the outside world either out of cultural ‘sufficiency’ vested in the “Middle

Kingdom,” focus on internal threat, or xenophobia. As the longstanding cultural hegemon throughout East and Southeast Asia, historic China has seldom sought political conquest outside her traditional borders, instead treating neighboring regimes as extensions of the central power radiating from the imperial government and expecting fealty, if not outright tribute from most, while often ignoring those too powerful to bully into submissive actions.²⁰ .

In fact, historically, “China has little experience in dealing with equals. In its dealings with peripheral peoples, China quite often knew when to stop. Its grip was seldom so tight that the air of respect and influence was lost in a storm of destruction.”²¹

Regionally, then, this gives modern China great confidence in dealing with neighbors especially if they can approach relationships from a position of strength. Admiral Thomas Fargo, Commander of US Pacific Command, noted that the Chinese have become increasingly willing and especially creative in taking part in diplomatic or other international opportunities in the Pacific region, especially when the United States is not a part.²² This almost Sun Tzu-like approach to diplomacy viewing larger nations “withdrawal” as a sign of weakness and, therefore, a strategic opportunity, should be no surprise to anyone observing through the lens of historical perspective, nor should be the results. “There is now this feeling that we have to consult the Chinese,” said Abdul Razak Baginda of the Malaysian Strategic Research Center.” He added, “We have to accept some degree of Chinese leadership, particularly in light of the lack of leadership elsewhere.”²³

Recent Trends in Defense Thought

The Defense “White Papers”

From 1998 to 2004, with the latest on the street in December 2004, the Chinese government has published “white papers” illustrating some of their policies, concerns, and strategic thinking regarding security and defense issues. Of particular interest is the evolution of these reports as they give great insight to both the recent changing nature of Chinese defense concerns as well as the abiding principles from which they have not strayed. The reports have also evolved in quality and style, with the 2004 White Paper much more reminiscent of the well-packaged and comprehensive National Security Strategies and Defense Strategies of the United States.²⁴

The 1998 White Paper, on the other hand, retains the tenor of standard communist texts of the past half-century although it also reflects traditional Chinese thinking of defense being based on the “Century of Shame” world view:

China has always attached primary importance to safeguarding the state's sovereignty, unity, territorial integrity and security. Following the Opium War in 1840, China was gradually reduced to a semi-colonial and semi-feudal country, and the Chinese nation was subject to the imperialist powers' invasion, oppression, bullying and humiliation time and time again. After a protracted, persistent and heroic struggle, the Chinese people won the independence for their country and the emancipation of the nation; therefore they hold dear their hard-earned right to independence. Defending the motherland, resisting aggression, safeguarding unity and opposing split are the starting point and underpinning of China's defense policy.²⁵

Even as late as 2000, the White Paper for that period refers to adherence to “the concept of people’s war under modern conditions”²⁶ By then, though, most Chinese military observers had already realized the obsolescence of “People’s War” in the face of high-tech military successes such as those demonstrated in Iraq and Kosovo. In fact, by

the publication of the 2002 White Paper, one can observe several changes. Notably, as the 2003 DoD report to Congress points out, the 2002 White Paper “did not explicitly criticize U.S. activities in the region and is significantly more moderate in tone.”²⁷ In addition, for the first time, a transnational issue like terrorism is pointed out as a major security concern. Additionally, instead of the usual reference from Maoist doctrine of “people’s war,” we find some inferences to a new doctrinal style of warfare: “Strategically, China pursues a principle featuring defensive operations, self-defense and attack only after being attacked. In response to the profound changes in the world's military field and the requirements of the national development strategy, China has formulated a military strategic guideline of active defense in the new period.”²⁸ This idea of “active defense” is actually rooted in classical Chinese thought, but readers of the White Papers will also note writings based in large measure to Chinese military scholars’ observations on United States and coalition allies’ military successes in the Middle East and Central Europe.

The latest in the Defense White Paper series, published in December 2004, explicitly dictates an increasingly modern strategic world view including principles often seen in US pronouncements of doctrine and strategy, such as engagement, modernization, and international cooperation. Affirming support for international commitments, the 2004 White Paper enumerates in some detail China’s support of United Nations peacekeeping operations:

Since its first dispatch of military observers to the UN peacekeeping operations in 1990, China has sent 3,362 military personnel to 13 UN peacekeeping operations, including 785 military observers, 800 (in two batches) engineering personnel to Cambodia, 654 (in three batches) engineering and medical personnel to Congo (Kinshasa), 1,116 personnel in transportation, engineering and medical units to Liberia, and seven staff

officers to the UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations. Since January 2000, China has sent 404 policemen to the peacekeeping operations in six UN peacekeeping task areas including East Timor. In 2004, China has sent 59 policemen to East Timor, Liberia, Afghanistan, Kosovo of Serbia-Herzegovina and Haiti, and a 125-member organic police detachment to Haiti to serve with MINUSTAH at the request of the UN. In the past 14 years, six Chinese servicemen lost their lives and dozens wounded in UN peacekeeping operations.²⁹

This stands in somewhat stark contrast to the prominent Chinese military scholar who noted “all the 3700-4000 wars in 4000 years of dynasties have been civil wars to unify the country and all the “8 military actions” since 1949 have been in self-defense. He goes on to state, “The facts are: there are no records showing that China invaded other countries or that China stations any soldiers abroad.”³⁰

In fact, Beijing has significantly deepened its involvement in the UN system in recent years, including participation in the Security Council, where China had been extremely passive in the past. During the 2003 ASEAN Regional Forum annual meeting, China proposed a security policy conference be established in which both military and civilians would participate. Analysts Yong Deng and Thomas Moore believe that even just a few years ago, such advocacy would have been unthinkable in light of China’s “victim complex” that resulted from its century of semi colonization after the Opium War in the 19th Century.³¹

Finally, the 2004 White Paper is clear about the desire to modernize and develop “a streamlined military with Chinese characteristics,” noting “the PLA gives priority to the building of ...Air Force and Second Artillery Force to seek balanced development of the combat force structure, in order to strengthen the capabilities with ...command of the air, and conducting strategic counter-strikes.” It further states, “the Air Force has gradually shifted from one of territorial air defense to one of both offensive and defensive

operations...appropriate in size...organization and structure and advanced in weaponry and equipment.” In a mirror, perhaps, of the US DoD’s own *Joint Vision 2020*, the White Paper notes “the first two decades of the 21st Century will be a crucial period for the reform and adjustment of defense-related science, technology, and industry.”³²

What emerges is a picture of a seemingly increasingly modern military strategy with reasonably internationally acceptable goals. The 2002 report still maintains older and, perhaps, more pointed mission directives, however, when it notes the responsibility of the PLA as still being:

To stop armed subversion and safeguard social stability

To stop separation and realize complete reunification of the motherland

To consolidate national defense, prevent and resist aggression.³³

Two years later, such explicit and traditional roles for the military were harder to find, but it still equated security with stability and still maintains ambiguous statements regarding offensive and defensive operations. Additionally, and perhaps somewhat more disconcertingly, the latest writings are beginning to recognize the military requirement not only to modernize in order to fight “high-tech local wars,” but also to seize initiative through pre-emption. A faculty member at the PLA’s National Defense University has written that “there never has been an actual case of the weak defeating the strong or the inferior defeating the superior” and therefore, “the fundamental strategic and operational tenet taking the PLA into the 21st Century is the absolute requirement to seize the initiative in the opening phase of a war...pre-emption may be necessary to gain and sustain the initiative in high-technology warfare.”³⁴ This tracks with other PLA leaders like the Air Force Chief of Staff, Lt Gen Zheng Shenxia who noted that without adopting a “pre-emptive doctrine, the chances of PLA victory are limited.”³⁵

The “Cult of Defense”

Characterizing Chinese security strategy is difficult because of the variety of contradictory influences that have an effect on it. Andrew Scobell argues that China has a dualistic strategic culture,

a Confucian one, which is conflict-averse and defensive-minded, and a Realpolitik one that favors military solution and is offense-minded...this produces...a “Chinese Cult of Defense” (like the Cult of Offense that helped produce WW I in Europe)...This cult predisposes Chinese leaders paradoxically to engage in offensive military operations as a primary alternative in pursuit of national goals, while rationalizing these actions as being purely defensive and a last resort. This dualistic strategic culture has been a constant, and China has not become more bellicose or dangerous in recent years except to the extent that its military capabilities have improved...³⁶

The Chinese will characterize all military actions as defensive in nature. Official sources in Beijing justify this by noting, “The defensive nature of China’s national defense policy...springs from the country’s historical and cultural traditions.”³⁷ At the same time, this contradictory and sometimes confusing mixing of offense and defense can cause confusion even within the civil and military leadership of the PLA. For example, recent analysis of Chinese Korean War campaigns has shown that by not following the (at that time, Maoist) doctrine of the strategic defensive, “the Chinese People’s Volunteers fought five offensive campaigns in a row—but, none...achieved the results expected” until the leadership finally realized the conflict would be protracted and required maintaining a defensive posture.³⁸ As long as basic military definitions of the offense and defense are still developed with political and historical overtones, the capacity to make similar mistakes remains even with the more professionalized PLA leadership.

Notes

- ¹ David Shambaugh, *Modernizing China's Military: Progress, Problems, and Prospects* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 59.
- ² Gries, *China's New Nationalism-Pride, Politics, and Diplomacy*, 17.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Richard L. Langhill, "History of Chinese and Japanese Civilization," n.p. On-line, Internet, 14 April 2005. Available from http://homepages.stmartin.edu/Fac_Staff/rlangill/HIS%20217/HIS%20217%20Maps.htm
- ⁵ Terrill, *The New Chinese Empire: Beijing's Political Dilemma and What it Means for the United States*, 81.
- ⁶ Ibid., 26.
- ⁷ John King Fairbank and Merle Goldman, *China, a New History* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1998), 32.
- ⁸ Ibid., 54-57.
- ⁹ Quoted in Terrill, *The New Chinese Empire: Beijing's Political Dilemma and What it Means for the United States*, 185.
- ¹⁰ Ibid, 26.
- ¹¹ Ibid, 189.
- ¹² Andrew Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 25, 32.
- ¹³ Terrill, *The New Chinese Empire: Beijing's Political Dilemma and What it Means for the United States*, 225.
- ¹⁴ Ibid, 225.
- ¹⁵ Shambaugh, *Modernizing China's Military: Progress, Problems, and Prospects*, 285.
- ¹⁶ Fairbank and Goldman, *China, a New History*, 101.
- ¹⁷ Bernstein and Munro, "The Coming Conflict with China." In Terrill, *The New Chinese Empire: Beijing's Political Dilemma and What it Means for the United States*, 26.
- ¹⁸ Andy Gudel, compiler, Conference Brief, *Chinese Crisis Management*, Strategic Studies Institute: Carlyle, PA 1-3 October 2004.
- ¹⁹ Quoted in Scobell, *China's Use of Military Force: Beyond the Great Wall and the Long March*, 80.
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Chapter 3

The Instrument of Defense

The People's Liberation Army

The primary instrument both in developing and carrying out defense doctrine and strategy of the PRC is the People's Liberation Army (PLA). Known for years as a force that emphasized, above all else, a large soldiery, it began in 1985 to "transform itself from an army whose superiority stemmed from sheer numbers of personnel and that was geared toward fighting a major land-based "people's war " to a technology-based military capable of more active defense to deal with more variegated local contingencies."¹

As previously mentioned, the latest defense white papers acknowledge that PLA transformation will focus and is focusing on more highly technical capabilities such those contained within the Air Force and the Second Artillery (missile and nuclear forces). Military scholars in the PLA have taken note of the Revolution in Military Affairs and have been particularly impressed with the efficacy of airpower. Senior Colonel Yao Yenzhu of the Academy of Military Science wrote in an unpublished paper,

"The dominance of the air battlefield illustrated by the Yugoslav war has great implications for China. The PLA is mainly a traditional ground force. It has to adjust its force structure, command and control system, doctrinal development, and training and education, as well as weapons acquisition, in accordance with this fundamental change in warfare. For example, the PLA would have to change its air defense concepts. Both survivable and effective air defense capabilities are essential to win a war.

Such air defense capabilities included passive and active means to counter enemy strikes.”²

Without a doubt, directly as the result of Chinese observations of the Yugoslav War, the PLA began a new program known as the “three attacks and three defenses” (*san da san fang*). The “three attacks” include attacking stealth aircraft, cruise missiles and armed helicopters; the “three defenses” are defending against enemy reconnaissance and surveillance, precision strikes, and electronic interference.³ Critical to any success in developing such capabilities will be the modernization of the Chinese military.

Modernization

When CIA director Porter Goss noted the modernization of the Chinese military as a key and potentially destabilizing trend in the region and an increasing area of concern for the United States, it was just the latest in such reporting from China observers.⁴ Analysts note that the most recent Chinese “development and acquisition efforts have been aimed primarily at defeating regional air forces, defending against aircraft at long ranges from China’s coast, defeating high-value air assets, denying US naval operations, and striking other targets such as airbases and air defense sites...modernization efforts through the 1990s were highlighted by the purchase of Su-27 and Su-30/FLANKER fighters from Russia and a license agreement to produce additional Su-27s from kits in China.”⁵

One area of Chinese military concern that has already been mentioned is the idea that ‘weak cannot defeat strong’ and much thinking has gone into strategy (such as pre-emptive attack) to change that. Additionally, Chinese history provides a concept known as “*sha shou jian*” which is most often translated as “assassin’s mace” (it is akin to a “secret weapon” that can turn momentum or cause defeat in a stronger enemy, not unlike

the German rocket and jet fighter programs at the end of World War II). This is an important idea for observers of the Chinese military since such thinking not only impacts warfighting methods, but also modernization and acquisition efforts as well. With the assassin's mace, then, "for China, the question is not *whether* the weak can overcome the strong, but *how* the weak will overcome the strong."⁶

As the Chinese attempt to develop "*sha shou jian*" via modernization efforts, their capacity for success will depend in great measure on a number of societal issues, of which at the fore is the economy.

Effect of Economy

Military analyst Richard Halloran notes that behind the Chinese military modernization effort "has been the rapid growth of the Chinese economy that pays for the military power. China's defense budget is estimated to have ballooned to \$80 billion, the world's third largest after the United States and Russia, and almost double that of Japan, which has Asia's second largest defense budget." China has primarily focused on hardware buys and their ability to purchase has been fueled by foreign exchange reserves of \$610 Billion (at the end of 2004).⁷

Official Chinese sources report that China's defense industry recorded strong growth in 2004, with revenue climbing more than 25 percent.⁸ At the same time, however, the lack of transparency in reporting leads to requiring caution in reviewing these numbers. For instance, defense budget pronouncements in China generally do not include procurement costs.⁹ This secrecy in total defense spending numbers is to be expected as part of an overall desire not to show one's hand in an area of weakness.

At the same time, finding true expenditures by sifting through the overly secret Chinese defense spending isn't very different from the difficulty in discerning the factual overall strength of the Chinese economy. Any United States graduate of a professional military education program can recite the basic forces of national power. High on that list is economic power. The apparent strength and growth of the overall Chinese economy pays for military modernization and the continued strength of that economy will ultimately be a key factor in their ability to sustain a modern high-tech force. Unfortunately, the same principle of ambiguity that was mentioned above abounds in any discussion of the modern Chinese economy, as well. Even official Chinese sources note concerns, albeit muted ones, while announcing economic growth figures. During his announcing of military spending increases and overall economic growth figures, PRC Prime Minister Wen Jia-bao noted, "We still need to solve quite a few problems in education, health and culture in rural areas; some low-income people lead difficult lives and there are more than a few factors threatening social stability"¹⁰

There is no question that the extraordinary economic success story of the PRC is an incomplete picture and, in fact, may not describe the true state of China's economy at all. Economic growth has been focused in the coastal region, primarily in the provinces of Guangdong, Jiangsu, and Zhejiang. "The other billion" Chinese living inland and in rural regions are still living in poverty and haven't felt any of the economic growth of these coastal and major urban areas.¹¹ Fifty percent of money placed into the Chinese banking system comes from only five percent of the population and when viewed, on a *per capita* basis, China is still a country of very serious problems that could abort a 'successful economy'.¹² With economic inequities between provinces growing, pressure on local and

provincial leadership has forced them to take all manner of creative financial actions that continue to destabilize rather than help the situation.¹³ This leads to serious problems in an already overstressed banking system where as many as 30 percent of loans are “bad” and most of the banks are overextended. “A secret struggle goes on between Beijing and key provinces over revenue and Beijing may not be winning it.”¹⁴ Analyst George Gilboy put it this way:

China's sudden rise as a global trading power has been greeted with a curious mixture of both admiration and fear. Irrational exuberance about the country's economic future has prompted investors to gobble up shares of Chinese firms with little understanding of how these companies actually operate. Meanwhile, overestimates of China's achievements and potential are fueling fears that the country will inevitably tilt global trade and technology balances in its favor, ultimately becoming an economic, technological, and military threat to the United States. These reactions, however, are equally mistaken: they overlook both important weaknesses in China's economic "miracle" and the strategic benefits the United States is reaping from the particular way in which China has joined the global economy.¹⁵

The true state of the Chinese economy is what will inevitably be the engine driving military spending and PLA modernization. If continued economic reform is unsuccessful or doesn't happen on a fast enough timeline, it will be increasingly difficult for PRC leaders to spend large amounts of money on the military when an economic crisis in the provinces could affect the stability and even the unity of the country. Successful military modernization will depend enormously on the ultimate “true” economic health of the country.

Innovation

The key to successful transformation has been described as innovation facilitated by technology and innovation requires both leadership that welcomes and grows new ideas and an atmosphere that is conducive to original thought.¹⁶ As a consequence, China's

weak military-industrial complex is an Achilles heel. Because China's economy is built around light industry rather than innovation, it can't produce a lot of its own hardware. "This has consistently been their weak point," says Yuan Jing-dong, research director at the Monterey Institute of International Studies.¹⁷

Historically, China can be remembered as a place of flourishing military innovation; creating and using explosive grenades, rockets, and bombs before the year 1000. "The technological creativity of the Chinese people has deep historical roots, and (has) slumbered for awhile...As it slowly reawakens, we may expect it to astonish us. It will one day, but not under communist repression."¹⁸ The lack of innovation, historical motivation to the contrary, is a great example of misinterpreting one's own history and emphasizing central control to a fault. With a technology policy rooted in nationalism, China also "remains wedded in many ways to "planned" innovation from the top down."¹⁹

A great example of the difficulty that lack of innovation provides to modernization of the Chinese military is the desired improvement of the Air Force. Numbering more than 3,000 obsolescent aircraft, the Air Force has yet to find a truly successful indigenous design to become the backbone of a force that can fight "high-tech" wars. Accordingly, the force modernization program relies heavily upon Russian and other former Soviet Union states for procurement of weapons systems and technical assistance.²⁰ The crown jewel of this enterprise is the acquisition and license to produce FLANKER fighters. Recent reports demonstrate, however, how tenuous (and frustrating for a country prizing "self-reliance") such dependence can be. In late 2004, as the Chinese found the version of the Su-27SK they produce under Russian license insufficient for the increasing

requirements they had determined (ability to launch anti-ship missiles) to be necessary, they canceled that license and will have to renegotiate with the Russians for a new license to produce an anti-ship capable Su-27SMK or Su-30MKK.²¹



Figure 2: Chinese licensed Su-27SK²²

Licensing becomes a poor substitute for indigenized technology since important equipment must be absorbed and mastered in order to become effective in stimulating domestic innovation. Chinese firms spend little of their capital on this (less than 10%). Additionally, they have failed to develop domestic technology logistical networks. For example, in 2002, they spent less than one percent of their science and technology budgets on domestically produced technology.²³ Not only is that devastating for the “true” state of the economy, it continues to suppress innovative behavior.

As analyst David Shambaugh²⁴ writes, there are numerous social, cultural and hierarchical impediments exist to discourage innovation. “...Generally speaking, technical information, particularly in the scientific and military sectors, is disseminated on a need-to-know basis...(there is) a conservatism in thought and behavioral norms that inhibit innovation; a preference for the status quo and fear of change that fosters risk aversion; pressures for conformity...disincentives to individualism; authoritarianism; and

a preference for “self-reliance” over interdependence.” There is no doubt this provides a serious hurdle for the PLA in its drive for modernization.

Personnel and Leadership Issues

While recent Chinese military concerns have focused on modernizing the “people’s army,” they have also come to a new understanding that a modern military requires modern military personnel to operate it. The 2004 Defense White Paper addresses this need specifically:

In August 2003, the CMC began to implement its Strategic Project for Talented People. The Project proposes that in one to two decades, the PLA will possess a contingent of command officers capable of directing informationalized wars and of building informationalized armed forces, a contingent of staff officers proficient in planning armed forces building and military operations, a contingent of scientists capable of planning and organizing the innovative development of weaponry and equipment and the exploration of key technologies, a contingent of technical specialists with thorough knowledge of new- and high-tech weaponry performance, and a contingent of NCOs with expertise in using weapons and equipment at hand. The Project will be implemented in two stages. By the end of 2010, there will be a remarkable improvement in the quality of military personnel, and a big increase in the number of well-educated personnel in combat units.²⁵

Unlike previous white papers, the latest also note the requirement for “joint” training at both the tactical and operational levels. At the same time, it’s apparent that there have been, in recent years, attempts to upgrade the quality and positions of military leadership with technical expertise and, in particular, experience with airpower and missile operations. For instance, in 2003, each military regional vice commander came from the Air Force, while commanders with air operations experience are being promoted to regional command and to positions in the Air Force Headquarters.²⁶ This may mean a trend of less political and more practical military leaders. Scobell calls these new

military leaders, “Techno-nationalists...younger, more experienced, better educated and less involved in day-to-day national politics...capable of continuing...along the path of military modernization.”²⁷ Yet, these are not radical leaders; they have been successful in implementing goals of modernization and reform that were laid out over a decade ago by Jiang Zemin. It remains to be seen whether they can deal with rapid international changes and surprises.²⁸



Figure 3: Beijing Military Unit exercises joint Command and Control²⁹

Certainly, as the Defense White Papers note, professional military education (PME) is and will be key to the development of modern leaders. Before the Chinese National Defense University was created in 1985, all Chinese PME was essentially single service (and heavily ground oriented) in nature. “However, the PLA needs to make much greater efforts in this area if it is to be able to conduct joint operations more effectively...most of the senior ranking instructors are from the ground forces...the PLA have yet to develop a system of joint service education for officers at lower levels of command.”³⁰

In addition, there remain questions on both the relationships and the decision making processes between the civilian and military leadership. Although the recent elevation of

Hu Jintao to head of the Central Military Committee (CMC) cements his position as titular head of the PLA, there are still questions about the highest levels of decision making processes with regard to defense issues. The EP-3 incident near Hainan Island spotlighted the glacial decision making manner of the civil-military leadership. Analysts feel that CCP decision making is based on consensus opinion within the party. “This cumbersome method can result in paralysis and does not allow Chinese leaders to react quickly to crises.”³¹

The Taiwan Question

If there is one issue that is required to be examined from the perspective of Chinese security strategy it's the issue of Taiwan. Every one of the defense white papers devotes time to this issue, although more or less stridently given the political situation across the Straits at the time.³²



Figure 4: Taiwan³³

There is evidence that as much as any issue, Taiwan is driving the desire to increase military leadership quality and, especially, to have joint experience on senior command staffs. Chinese language reports note “that a war against Taiwan by the mainland, which

would be considered "a local war under high-tech conditions," would enlist the services of the Second Artillery Corps, the Air Force, the Navy, and the Ground Forces; and this would require all top commanding officers involved to have not only a good command of the operational tactics of the Ground Forces but also the expertise in commanding coordinated operations on the sea and in air." These reports further stated that the reason for the elevation of the PLA Air Force, PLA Navy, and Second Artillery commanders to the CMC demonstrates the PLA's intention to heighten the status of the Navy, the Air Force, and the Second Artillery Corps in future modern wars.³⁴

If there is an issue that the PLA sees as one that is historically and culturally theirs, it is that of the "reunification" of Taiwan with the PRC. Not only is the PLA's attitude toward Taiwan colored by intense nationalism, but it is also affected by the deep-seated belief that the military bears a special responsibility for achieving unification with Taiwan. Since 1949, they have been "on the frontline in the Taiwan Strait with the mission of liberating the last bastion of Chiang (Kai Shek)."³⁵

It's difficult to understand the depth of commitment that is felt on this issue by the PRC. Although China's historical claims to Taiwan are tenuous at best, their published and revised history puts Taiwan in the same category as other disputed border regions and provinces and this is an issue that trips the "national unity concern" switch. The depth of the Chinese belief in the historical requirement for reunification with Taiwan is easily seen by the quote by the PRC Prime Minister regarding the recent "anti-secession" law aimed at Taiwan, "the United States Congress had passed similar resolutions in 1861 with the intent to stave off civil war, though he said he hoped the Chinese law would be more successful."³⁶

Vice Chairman of the CMC (and civilian member of the Politburo) Guo Boxiong recently reiterated the PLA's view on this subject: "We will seek to resolve the Taiwan issue peacefully with our utmost sincerity but will never pledge to renounce the use of force. If a grave turn of events occurs leading to the separation of Taiwan from China in any name, we will be forced to take all possible resolute measures, including the use of force. The Chinese PLA has the determination, confidence and ability to crush any plots and provocations aimed at dividing the motherland and will resolutely safeguard our nation's territorial integrity."³⁷

Interestingly, a similar interview with two PLA general officers, while eliciting a similar response regarding military preparedness and belief that the issue of Taiwan would be solved before 2020, also noted that "under the premise of one China, anything can be discussed, including cooperation in the military realm."³⁸ Traditionally, Chinese military leaders have been more reluctant to use military force than their civilian statesmen counterparts.³⁹ However, the volatile nature of the Taiwan issue may influence this dynamic in much more dangerous ways.

It should be clear that the Taiwan issue is the driving force behind modernization of both the capabilities and the personnel of the PLA. A well-circulated report that is believed to have come out of the General Office of the CMC in 1999 states, "Taking into account the possible intervention by the United States and based on the development strategy of our country, it is better to fight now than future—the earlier, the better. The reason being that, if worse comes to worse; we shall gain control of Taiwan before full deployment of US troops. In this case, the only thing the United States can do is fight a

war with the purpose of retaliation, which will be similar to the Gulf War against Iraq or the recent bombing of Yugoslavia.”⁴⁰

The variables that exist with regard to the Taiwan “question” make this the most dangerous area of interest with regard to the PLA. It should be noted that the saying, “one problem gives good improvement opportunities” can be used to justify action as way of focusing the military modernization process. Additionally, Chinese civil-military leadership’s opinion of the United States’ view will weigh heavily on any action taken in the next five to ten years. One US diplomat’s observation was that the United States’ preoccupation with the Global War on Terrorism, for instance, in the Chinese leadership’s opinion, opens windows of opportunity for them possibly to exploit.⁴¹

“Reverse” Mirror Imaging

In the same way that an analyst studying the Chinese must avoid “mirror imaging,” one must also be aware of the potential for the Chinese to do the same regarding their understanding of others to include the United States. One official Chinese commentator described Americans, recently, as “worried about China’s...emergence as an economic power and becoming increasingly influential in the region” as well as linking domestic economic woes to Chinese trade and value of the Chinese *Yuan*.⁴² Understanding that actions by the United States are being interpreted through lenses of their own history, culture and views are the first step in taking appropriate military actions that enhance rather than degrade US-China relations.

Notes

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Chapter 4

The U.S. Air Force Response

In examining trends in Chinese security and defense strategies, it's important to determine, then, how they, in turn, require the United States military to respond. Noting how the motivation for much of recent Chinese military thought is the application of technology, especially airpower, makes it a valid exercise to explore specific ideas and recommendations for the US Air Force to act upon under its readiness charter. By basing such recommendations on a holistic view of defense issues from the Chinese perspective, they could be expected to have more apparent value and thus, potentially be more easily justified in a resource-constrained world. This paper's recommendations fall into two major areas: deterrence and engagement. A comprehensive report published in a similar vein to this one in 1999 also offered a number of recommendations based on implications for the US Air Force.¹ While several still remain valid and are mentioned herein, in keeping with the holistic nature of this paper, it commends several broader reaching ideas for the force, as well.

Deterrence and “Dissuasion”

To a great extent, PLA improvement actions have been a response to the success of US and coalition forces since 1991 in Southwest Asia and Europe. The value of similar

capability in providing deterrence can't be overemphasized as showing strength can be an effective way of demonstrating interest and awareness and when that capability is presented with appropriate diplomatic and other means of engagement, it provides an efficient use of military power to preserve peace. Additionally, a comprehensive display of multiple national "powers" inclusive of the military can lead to a greater outcome than just deterrence from force, but also to "dissuasion" from otherwise ill-advised actions that don't include force, but are nonetheless destructive behaviors. While "overwhelming force is a convincing deterrent to the use of force against American interests, it has its limits. History does not support the notion that superior force in itself is sufficient to dissuade a weaker state from strengthening its defenses. Recent experience in Korea, the Middle East, and South Asia does not support it, either. To be effective, a "dissuasive" posture must be accompanied by explicit incentives. Otherwise, it is merely useful in deterring attack, less useful in dissuading an adversary from improving his military position"²

Pacific Deployment/Employment of Airpower

As noted, the critical nexus for possible PLA action in the near term remains Taiwan. Accordingly, deterrence measures in the Pacific area must be organized with that in mind. Since the PLA terms any military action against Taiwan as a limited high-tech war and believes that success, especially within any near term timeframe (less than 10 years), will rely on extreme speed to eliminate US and other coalition options, appropriate deterrence must include capabilities to remove any inkling that such a military maneuver will be effective. Investment in basing of high technology, precision strike capable aircraft such as the F/A-22 in the region is an imperative and the ability to launch such

aircraft without potentially alliance-damaging political ramifications will help to eliminate thinking that a Taiwan invasion is a viable alternative to peaceful negotiation and diplomatic efforts. Additionally, continued deployment of intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets into the Pacific theater will also deter attempts to use surprise as a force multiplier. Long dwell assets like GLOBAL HAWK have the potential to significantly decrease opportunities for pre-emptive action. A great example of such a basing location, close in proximity and free from potential geopolitical entanglements is the island of Guam. Other Marianas islands may offer similar capabilities. Airmen should be similarly supportive of the continued presence and forward basing of one or more Carrier Strike Groups to provide Naval aviation assets. Such assets will be enhanced as well by the upgrading of their aircraft with the F-35. Concern for aggression in a Taiwan scenario also renews the requirement for the US Air Force's global reach capability. Because this is often a critical theater force resource that is not located "in theater," the high quality of this Air Force competency must be clearly articulated regularly to all parties concerned internationally. Of course, in order to be "dissuasive" rather than simply a deterrent (and, thereby, potentially an excuse for continued arms acquisition and military growth), these actions must be part of a complete China policy that includes diplomatic and economic initiatives.

Technological Advances

Fiscal arguments continue to be made against the latest technologically advanced aircraft presently being produced as the next generation of American airpower. When viewed as a potential peer competitor, the PLA Air Force provides one of the better arguments for the investment in the technology of the F/A-22, F-35, UCAV, E-10 and

other advanced assets. No military has embraced the understanding of the capability of airpower to change the battle space more than the Chinese. The shortfalls of their own economy and political system likely will continue to make it extremely difficult to produce indigenous aircraft to threaten the most capable of these new generation aircraft. However, their willingness to continue to search extraterritorially for, perhaps, a hybrid capability that would, by way of example, add one country's electronic technology to another's airframe to provide, not a quantum leap, but a significant leap in PLAAF potential is a concern and provides a clever, if not innovative means of modernization. Deployment of modern stealth capable, precision strike aircraft will act as deterrence and, when coupled with diplomatic actions that include control of potential access to such hybrid technology by the PLAAF, provides opportunities to dissuade them from adventurism and miscalculated military action.

Engagement

A second pillar of recommended activity for the US Air Force is the area of engagement. The value of military participation in engagement activities can not be overstated. When applied with clear goals and accurate situational awareness, engagement activities join deterrence activities in providing incentives for potential "dissuasion" from self-destructive as well as regionally destabilizing actions. It's been said by way of reminder, "If we forget the balance of power and practice naïve engagement, Beijing will take advantage of our innocence to combine mercantilism with expanded international influence. If we follow a policy of clear-eyed engagement, maintaining an equilibrium in East Asia, centered on the alliances with Japan, Korea, Australia, and others, two processes will occur. Increasing economic interdependence

will continue to put pressure on China's autocratic political system. And Beijing will hesitate to expand its maritime empire because the United States stands in the path."³

Military-to-military Relationships

If, as former French Premier Georges Clemenceau said, "War is too important to be left to the generals," then perhaps the converse is true that diplomacy is too important to be left to the diplomats. Indeed, with the potential for missteps in military action in the Asian region, every effort must be expended to reduce uncertainty and opportunity for miscalculation. This has even more urgency as long as there remains uncertainty regarding Chinese civil-military leadership relationships. Admiral Fargo, then Combatant Commander of US Pacific Command expressed exactly this concern in the autumn of 2004, noting his concern for "the insular nature of the PLA leadership" and his fear that they may be out of touch with theater counterparts and possibly out of touch with economic and other actions by the Chinese civilian leadership.⁴

There is no question the Chinese military understands the value of military-to-military contacts. In the 2004 Defense White Paper, they justly are proud of the significant increase in military students sent abroad to study as well as those from other countries received to study at PLA institutions. Over the past two years, 1,245 military personnel from 91 countries went to study in Chinese military colleges and universities, and officers from 44 of these countries have participated in the fifth and sixth International Symposium Course hosted by the PLA-NDU.⁵

Based on desire for recognition of its place as a significant regional force, the PLA should ultimately welcome renewed attempts to establish new and continue other relationships between US Airmen and themselves. In addition to continual high-level

discussions, it's important that such engagement also takes place between mid-level leaders and others—particularly in fora like Professional Military Education programs where personal relationships and the transparency that comes from daily interaction with counterparts helps to dispel suspicion and foster relationships that can overcome future potential misunderstanding by providing the basis for communication and trust. Continuing to push for such activities occasionally seems futile bumping up against Beijing's bureaucracy and occasional xenophobia based on interpretation of history, but the value of such interaction outweighs just about all US concerns and should always be a centerpiece of US Pacific Command and US Air Force engagement proposals. Nature seems to abhor a vacuum and should such relationships be limited artificially or for other seemingly apparent, but usually shortsighted reasons, it should be expected that the Chinese military will continue to engage with others, as demonstrated by recent willingness to re-engage with Russian military forces in an anti-terrorist exercise called "Cooperation 2005," scheduled for summer 2005 to be held in China.⁶

Admiral Dennis Blair, Admiral Fargo's predecessor as US Pacific Command commander said this in remarks to the Council on Foreign Affairs:

I think that our military to military relations with China need both objectives and criteria. The objectives are the elimination of misunderstandings. I think it's important for ...Chinese military officers to understand that personally, and for American military officers to understand that personally. I think a way to do that is to visit and talk. I've deepened my understanding of China by going there to visit and talk...and I know that the Chinese officers who have visited us have also come away realizing what the United States can do....although this Taiwan issue sits dead center in the middle of the US-China military relationship, there are other areas in which the armed forces of the United States and the People's Liberation Army can and should be working together...against terrorism...against drugs....on international peace-keeping operations which are in both our interests...this common problem of North Korea...on piracy...So, I think there are a number of areas in

which the United States and China should actually be cooperating militarily, not just visiting and talking.⁷

Language and Cultural Training within the Force

The recently approved “Defense Language Transformation Roadmap” is an important first step in increasing US Air Force capabilities in areas of understanding the cultural milieu of the Chinese military and to have the rudimentary tools to study internally published works by PLA analysts to gain insights and perspective to Chinese military capabilities, intentions, and beliefs. To date, training in Asian languages for all US government personnel has been increased only marginally. Training and education in such a difficult language group requires generational planning and the US has much catching up to do. “...Only several thousand American students are now studying in China, compared to the more than 50,000 Chinese who are now studying in US schools.”⁸

The initial goals of general foreign language improvement for all US military officers are admirable, but to create or expand the capability of military personnel who have the requisite operational understanding of their craft to become familiar enough with difficult languages like Chinese will require creative thinking and action. This is especially true if we want to increase this capability beyond a small cadre of Foreign Area Officers and intelligence analysts (although they will benefit as well). Perhaps in efforts to increase US governmental interagency cooperation, reassignment or deployment preparation of expeditionary Airmen should require routine language training in the same way that US Foreign Service Officers are required to take language instruction before new overseas postings. At any rate, the dangers of “language gap” are clear to most Chinese analysts. They note, “Few American PLA watchers can read

Chinese well enough to perform primary source research or are trained with machine language translation and other tools. They remain largely dependent upon Chinese military literature in translation...failure to keep up with developments in the Chinese national defense establishment by exploiting primary sources (especially PRC military journals and books) can prevent identification of key indicators of change or warning of developments that are of interest to US policymakers. In a worst case scenario, the failure to monitor Chinese military literature could be a contributing factor in a future miscalculation or intelligence failure.”⁹

The Air Force’s Role in US National Education

In detailing geopolitical concerns from a high-tech business point of view, Cisco Systems, Inc., CEO John Chambers noted a significant worry regarding Asian relations: that of extreme numbers of university students pursuing advanced degrees in technical fields from Asian countries, notably China, in comparison to the decreasing number of American students taking advanced degrees in similar areas.¹⁰ When taking a long view of trends, this should be of concern to the US Air Force, in particular, as perhaps the premier military operator of advanced technology. While knowledge and familiarity do not alone make up for deficiencies in innovative thought by themselves, the lack of them in hard sciences and engineering certainly will be a critical component in the lessening of innovation.

This is a perfect example of the opportunity to act while having indirect positive effects in the long term outcome of the US relationship with China. For the US Air Force to take “flight lead” in new and renewed initiatives to encourage American students in mathematics, sciences and engineering will only lead to favorable effects for the service.

High-tech military solutions, while not necessarily the only piece of a deterrence puzzle, will always pay a premium in capability that can help dissuade potential adversaries from acting rashly or from a misguided sense of a perceived “window of vulnerability.” This will be as true in decades to come as it is now, but the people who will create those technological breakthroughs will require training and education that starts today. Such a “long view” of the issue is not unique to concerns in the Pacific theater, but it’s particularly apropos when applied to issues of US-China relations.

Notes

¹ Zalmay M Khalilzad, et.al, *The United States and a Rising China: Strategic and Military Implications* (Santa Monica: Project Air Force, RAND Corporation, 1999).

² Sidney Drell and James Goodby, “What Are Nuclear Weapons For?” Unpublished manuscript in possession of author, March 7, 2005.

³ Terrill, *The New Chinese Empire: Beijing’s Political Dilemma and What it Means for the United States*, 228.

⁴ Adm Thomas Fargo, “Our Asia-Pacific Future.”

⁵ *China’s National Defense in 2004* (Beijing, PRC: Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, December 2004).

⁶ “China Military Exercise,” *Moscow Times*, January 31, 2005, 4.

⁷ Quoted in Terrill, *The New Chinese Empire: Beijing’s Political Dilemma and What it Means for the United States*, 337.

⁸ James F. Hoge, Jr., “A Global Power Shift in the Making,” *Foreign Affairs*, online edition, July/August 2004, n.p., On-line, Internet, 2 March 2005. Available from <http://fullaccess.foreignaffairs.org/20040701faessay83405/james-f-hoge/a-global-power-shift-in-the-making.html>.

⁹ Scobell and Wortzel, *Civil-Military Change in China: Elites, Institutes, and Ideas After the 16th Party Congress*, 351.

¹⁰ John Chambers, CEO, seminar to Department of Defense Fellows, Cisco Systems, Inc., 7 Mar 2005.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

The United States must also avoid creating a self-fulfilling prophecy of strategic rivalry with China. Such a rivalry may in fact come to pass, and the United States should be prepared for such a turn of events. But it is not inevitable; cooperation could still produce historic advancements.

--James F. Hoge, Jr

Former National Security Advisor Zbigniew Brzezinski recently asked the question, “Is conflict between China and the United States inevitable?” In answering his own rhetorical question, he was optimistic for two reasons: one was that with both countries owning nuclear weapons, there is an automatic restraint similar to that seen in the Cold War based on mutual deterrence. At least as important to him, though, was the “reality of intimacy in international society” that differs greatly from the opaque relations that typically led to the great power struggles of the 20th Century. His sense is that exchanges of students and increasingly intertwined international business relationships “forge an environment where competition and, even, clashes can result, but full-scale war can be deterred by leadership and diplomacy.”¹ Left unspoken is the requirement for the military and in particular US Airmen to be part of that leadership, not only of deterrence, but also of dissuasion.

Understanding the nature of the Chinese military is a critical first step to any action and interaction the US military chooses to take in the Asia-Pacific region. With the greatest area for potential to escalate to crisis being Taiwan, it's wise to remember the words of Kenneth Lieberthal, who wrote, "Wars sometimes occur because of miscalculations influenced by the weight of historical legacies. In the case of the Taiwan Strait, the dangers of such a conflict are so clear and the potential consequences so dire, that all three major players should summon the courage to think creatively about how to prevent it." ²

US military actions with regard to China must meet ambiguity with flexibility, suspicion with openness, and "defensive" belligerence with obvious resolve. Such undertakings start with as complete understanding as possible of the different historical, political and sociological engines that are more often than not critical components of Chinese security strategies.

The "Long View"

Perhaps of greatest importance when faced with issues regarding Chinese defense strategies is developing the art of patience and taking a longer view. It's wise to remember that the Chinese word for crisis (*wei ji*) can be translated as a dangerous *moment* in time; crises can often be defused when adjusting one's time scale from moments to a longer frame of reference. Recently, Taiwan's President Chen Shui-bian replied to a question regarding a timeframe for unification thusly, "thirty years is just a proposed time frame...we could delay it to 50 or 100 years. Why not?"³

For US forces used to dealing with inexorable fiscal deadlines and desire for rapid results, the ability to take a long view of Chinese military relationships may be the most difficult thing to do, but also the most rewarding.

Notes

¹ Brzezinski, "The Oksenberg Lecture."

² Kenneth Lieberthal, "Preventing a War Over Taiwan," *Foreign Affairs* online edition, March/April, 2005, n.p., On-line, Internet, 3 February 2005. Available from <http://fullaccess.foreignaffairs.org/20050301faessay84206/kenneth-lieberthal/preventing-a-war-over-taiwan.html>.

³ Quoted in "Offering an Olive Twig", *Newsweek*, 7 Mar 05, 30.

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